

# The Gerascophobic Treatment of Clarissa Dalloway in Virginia Woolf's Mrs Dalloway: A Semantic Analysis

Vagisha Mishra<sup>1</sup>, Dr Anoop Kumar Tiwari<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, NIT Raipur, Chhattisgarh, India  
Email: vagisha.mishra2711@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup>Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, NIT Raipur, Chhattisgarh, India  
Email: aktiwari.eng@nitrr.ac.in

**Abstract**— The paper investigates the gerascophobic temperament of the protagonist, Clarissa Dalloway in Virginia Woolf's Mrs Dalloway following the theory of semantic analysis. Although the plot orbits mundane events yet beneath the surface of everyday life, thoughts of progression towards death lurk persistently. With the help of the terms and expressions made by different characters in the novel, the paper finds how Virginia Woolf sets up the gerascophobic temperament of the characters by placing several personal, temporal, spatial and social lexical expressions in the novel at various intervals subconsciously.

**Keywords**— Gerascophobia, semantic analysis, language, old age, death, suicide.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Virginia Woolf's Mrs Dalloway gives a glimpse of the life of a gerascophobic character, Clarissa Dalloway, who is an upper class housewife. The novel revolves around the nooks and corners of high society, where shallow public gatherings are considered to be more vital than the death of a soldier, Septimus Smith, who surrenders his life as a consequence of not being able to tolerate the pain of shell shock.

## II. GERASCOPHOBIA

The triviality of human life can be gauged from the fact that the pressure to be a good host constantly lurks over the life of the protagonist. Although the plot orbits mundane events yet beneath the surface of everyday life, thoughts of progression towards death lurk persistently. The gerascophobic temperament among the characters like Clarissa and Peter make their interactions significant at one hand and intimidating on the other.

The beginning episode of the novel is evocative of the fear of ageing that strikes the protagonist time and again. The novel begins with Clarissa going to the market to buy flowers for her party whereby she reminisces a moment in

her youth when she suspected a terrible event would occur. The very same moment, Big Ben tolls out the hour and Clarissa recurs a funeral song from Shakespeare's Cymbeline over and over as the day goes on, "Fear no more the heat o' the sun / Nor the furious winter's rages." While these words in Cymbeline celebrate death as a comfort after a difficult life, it is indicative of the gerascophobic temperament Clarissa embodies. The phrase "furious winter's rages" suggests the winter of human life, old age and the "heat o' the sun" evokes the emotional and physical pangs of ageing.

Similarly, the flower imagery suggests that Woolf believes women to be like flower which withers away after blossoming for a short span.

## III. SENSE OF LOSS

Akin to her creator, Clarissa too is a middle aged woman who has underwent the pain of losing her father, mother, and sister and has lived through the calamity of war. Been the victim of a vulnerable adolescence, Clarissa deems even one ordinary day as precarious. Throughout the course of the novel, the idea of death and ageing quite naturally creep in her thoughts. As Clarissa ages, she finds it hard to know anyone, which makes her feel lonely. She hesitates to define herself. Weakening, weighed down by the pressures of life, and drowning are far too easy choices for her. Clarissa is fifty-two, and has lived through a war. Her experiences intensify the dangers of living and of confronting the world and other people.

## IV. THE ALTER EGO

As Septimus embraces death by committing suicide, Clarissa ultimately helps herself to be at peace with her own mortality. The character of Septimus Smith works as an alter ego of Clarissa Dalloway, who finds it easier to die rather than choosing what seems to both Clarissa and Septimus a direr alternative—living another day. Although Clarissa had experienced death at a tender age

when her sister Sylvia passed away, she did not want to believe that death was the complete end to everything. Instead she assumed that people survived, both in others and in the natural world.

## V. THE PARALLELED LIFE

Just as she returns home after buying flowers for the party, Clarissa's anxiety is evident when she speculates herself to be an old lady, believing age to be a matter of embarrassment before her former suitor, Peter Walsh, "That she had grown older? Would he say that, or would she see him thinking when he came back, that she had grown older? It was true. Since her illness she had turned almost white." While the colour 'white' evokes an ameliorative sense, here it stands for sterility, gloominess and colourlessness, hinting the pejorative semantic change in the meaning. Furthermore, the ephiphoric use of the word, 'old' and 'white' suggests that the magnitude of feeling was too intense for Clarissa. This is emphasized even better when Peter in the same episode, few lines after is seen thinking, "She's grown older, he thought, sitting down. I shan't tell her anything about it, he thought, for she's grown older." The phrase "I shan't tell her anything about it, he thought, for she's grown older," carries a denotational semantic meaning of old age being a ghastly fact to be discussed, which should be kept under the curtains.

Furthermore, when Clarissa learns that Peter is in love with some younger woman she says, "He was in love! Not with her. With some younger woman, of course." The phrase, 'of course' stands as the affirmation of old age being the reason behind making a woman unworthy of love and attention.

The gerascophobic temperament of Virginia Woolf is further stressed when Peter Walsh also starts showing alertness about his age as he adds, "Stop! Stop! He wanted to cry. For he was not old; his life was not over; not by any means. He was only just past fifty." The dreadful tone set by the author is apparent with the phrase, "Stop! Stop!" indicating that Woolf's characters want to be in charge of time which is progressing towards their old age, augmenting the disposition of gerascophobia. Rather than taking ageing as an epitome of wisdom and experience, the narrative treats old age as the tool which has the capability of ending the life.

The impertinence for ageing is reflected in many places when the narrative draws attention to the phrase, "He was not old, or set, or dried in the least." "Dried in the least" shows the repulsiveness of the author with natural ageing as the word 'dried' indicates a highly pejorative semantic meaning, implying the shriveling away of a fresh thing.

The way of describing 'elderly' characters by narrative is not only striking but also throws light on the temperament of Virginia Woolf, who herself committed suicide later at

the age of 59, implying that a willful death is better than experiencing the pangs of ageing. In addition, as soon as the novel progresses and gains momentum, the phrase "the death of soul" is repeated consistently about more than five times in a single paragraph. "The death of soul" highlights that the souls of Woolf's characters, especially that of Clarissa and Peter have withered away with their youth and the remaining life is not merely flavorless but also burdensome to continue with.

Besides, as the novel progresses we get a glimpse of an incredibly grim reality of Clarissa's life where she links her isolated attic with her loneliness and death. The bedroom seems to be the metaphor of graveyard rather than symbolizing fertility, as we are told that her fertile mind is shrinking into her coffin and burial shroud. This gruesome depiction of Clarissa's bedroom gives a graphic intimation of death and phobia of ageing.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The death of Septimus Smith, who is supposed to be an alter ego of Clarissa, strikes a chord that reverberates with her mood. Clarissa withdraws to consider her party's deeper meaning by imaginatively recreating the scenario of Septimus's suicide and clearly comprehends her thoughts mirror his. This not only catalyzes a change in her, but also presents the grim reality of Bradshaw's utilitarian world.

Middle-aged Clarissa struggles to discover her role in a society that places great significance on fulfilling sexual stereotypes. Clarissa feels imperceptible, virginal, and unlike now that she is fifty two years old and will not have any more children. She feels inane in her yellow-feathered hat before Hugh, as Hugh is handsome and well dressed, and somehow Clarissa now feels as if she is devoid of sexuality. Clarissa's daughter, Elizabeth, is almost grown, and now, with mothering behind her, Clarissa tries to ascertain her principle in life, since women of her class and generation were not trained for careers. Clarissa feels her role is to be a meeting-point for others. She gathers people together, as she will at her party that night.

The novel witnesses the process of aging and death in two different ways through two different characters. The narrative itself claims, that time is a thing to be afraid of, "*she feared time itself, and read on Lady Bruton's face, as if it had been a dial cut in impassive stone, the dwindling of life; how year by year her share was sliced*" "*she feared time itself, and read on Lady Bruton's face, as if it had been a dial cut in impassive stone, the dwindling of life; how year by year her share was sliced*".

Clarissa embodies the ruination of society as she herself falls apart at the promise of her own aging and death. Akin to an era, she senses the ending of her chief period and begins to break down, contented with a new order of life

that she no longer finds herself capable of assimilating to. She dwells on the shallow aspects of aging and others make a note of the changes in her appearance. The obsession with her outer appearance and the loss she feels as she begins to grow away from youth and beauty is evident in various episodes of the novel. Images of wilted flowers and fragile petals reflect the way she perceives the natural order of life and death. Denial and fear puzzle her belief as she often ponders her own mortality.

Meanwhile, Septimus ages during his time in the war, from a young romantic to an alienated and disenchanted man who challenges the perceptions of reality. While Clarissa and other characters mull over on a budding youth filled with virtue and love, Septimus believes his youth to be marked by death and a struggle for existence. The loss of his beloved captain, Evans, denotes an everlasting transition in Septimus, from a wide-eyed nationalist on a mission to guard the history and esteem of his country, to an estranged, meditative man. Choosing to commit suicide, Septimus efficiently ends aging, never experiencing the material effect of growing older. His introspection and contemplation in life create a dual opposition to Clarissa and her Victorian values. Every belief and value that she has is systematically tattered through the narrative of Septimus' conscious. In this process, Woolf communicates the objective of the Modernist movement to disentangle Victorian society. "...did it matter that she must inevitably cease completely? All this must go on without her; did she resent it; or did it not become consoling to believe that death ended absolutely?"

Clarissa is infatuated with her mortality. Every strike of the Big Ben brings her closer and closer to the end, and the terror in her heart and psyche grow louder as the day grows on. She beseeches for time to cease, for death to approach more slowly, but she senses each hour coming on more swiftly than the last, until finally her home is filled with guests and her party is in full swing. While people come in her party, Clarissa feels uncommitted, like she is invisible and is a mere observer of life rather than a contributor. These feelings heap on as she comes across various people from her times of yore, the faces of Sally Setton, Peter Walsh, Hugh Whitbread reflect the passage of time and the changes that eventually come in its wake. She is finally confronted by the realities of life and death, which she had been cautiously avoiding for so long, and in a way this devastates her. She understands the facade which she had clung to is at last ripped away. The party scene is a rebirth for Clarissa. The scene highlights that the old Clarissa dies, giving birth to a new one, which symbolizes the death of Victorianism, the death of a world sheltered from life, censored by society. This episode allows her to perceive her life with clarity.

"...and the words came to her, Fear no more the heat of the sun. She must go back to them. But what an

extraordinary night! She felt somehow very like him – the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away"

"...now that he was quite alone, condemned, deserted, as those who are about to die are alone, there was a luxury in it, an isolation full of sublimity; a freedom which the attached can never know."

Furthermore, it is apparent that Septimus himself is an embodiment of death. The death of Septimus epitomizes the death of innocence and youth, the death of society, and lastly of humanity. It is noteworthy to observe that Septimus accepts death devoid of fear and hesitation, knowing that it is the only way to rid society of the past and allow for the coming of a new age with fresh ideals. Seen as insane by the doctors and the strangers on the street, Septimus signifies the apprehension of change in society. Though he himself was not suited for the new era, he was adaptive, and his personal evolution is a testament to the authority of the war and the power of modernity. The impact and influence of the war is not lost on Septimus, whose role was to enlighten the readers to the inevitability of death and the purpose of life.

As Littleton suggests, while Septimus goes mad, Clarissa hides her difference and remains externally integrated with society because conformity was a practical necessity for women, particularly of Clarissa's class, imprisoned centuries of male control of all wealth and almost all means to indeed, of practically every aspect of public life. As a man, could not avoid subjection to the most extreme dysfunctions social order, Clarissa suffers with gerascophobia throughout the course of the novel, while her daughter, Elizabeth outlives the same.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Forbes, Shannon. "Equating Performance with Identity: The Failure of Clarissa Dalloway's Victorian "Self" in Virginia Woolf's "Mrs. Dalloway"." The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association (2005): 38-50.
- [2] Littleton, Jacob. "Mrs. Dalloway: Portrait of the artist as a middle-aged woman." Twentieth Century Literature 41.1 (1995): 36-53.
- [3] Thomson, Jean. "Virginia Woolf and the Case of Septimus Smith." The San Francisco Jung Institute Library Journal 23.3 (2004): 55-71.
- [4] Edmondson, Annalee. "Narrativizing Characters in Mrs. Dalloway." Journal of modern literature 36.1 (2012): 17-36.